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CYRUS BALLOU COMSTOCK (1831-1910)

Fellow in Class I, Section 4, 1892.

General Cyrus Ballou Comstock was born in West Wrentham, Massachusetts, February 3, 1831, and represented the ninth generation of an old New England family, which came from Devonshire, England. His ancestors lived in New London, and the earliest of them in this country fought in the Pequot war, taking part in the expedition which captured the fort at Mystic in 1637. Later generations of the family lived in Rhode Island and in Massachusetts. The General's great-grandfather was a Quaker, and took no active part in the Revolution, but was a member of the Massachusetts convention which ratified the Constitution of the United States, February 7, 1788, and was also a member of the General Court of Massachusetts in 1789.

General Comstock was educated in the local public schools and at a private academy. His interest in engineering arose from his happening to see the operations and instruments of a party making a railroad survey, and also of a coast survey party. The General began his professional work as a rodman and leveler on the Providence & Worcester Railroad, but in 1851 was nominated as a candidate to West Point, and was graduated with first honors in 1855. He served through all grades in the Corps of Engineers to that of Colonel, and was retired from active service by operation of law in 1895. He was promoted to the grade of Brigadier General on the retired list in 1904.

General Comstock, after serving on the construction of fortifications before the Civil War, and as Professor of Natural Philosophy at West Point from 1859 to 1861, was, during the Civil War, engaged in the construction of the defences of Washington, and in service on the engineering staff of the Army of the Potomac, of which he was Chief Engineer. He was present, under General Grant, at the siege of Vicksburg, and in 1864 was appointed Aide-de-camp to General Grant, being engaged in a number of the most sanguinary battles of the war. During the war he received rapid promotion, and attained the rank of Major in the Corps of Engineers, and Brevet Brigadier General.

General Comstock's principal work after the war was in the conduct of the geodetic survey of the Great Lakes, which had been inaugurated in 1841. This work was conducted with all the precision necessary to

determine not only the topography and hydrography of the region, but also to be of geodetic value. The measurements were made with extreme accuracy, involving eight primary base lines, a primary triangulation about 1650 miles in length, and a hydrographic survey covering nearly 10,000 square miles, and also the investigation of the earth's magnetism. His report on this great work, published as Professional Paper No. 24 of the Corps of Engineers, in 1882, is a document of great value and permanent interest to geodesists, and is a monument to his professional ability and that of his associates.

General Comstock was also engaged in studies relating to the improvement of rivers and deltas, and was sent to Europe to investigate these subjects. He served on several boards, and was Superintending Engineer to examine the progress of jetties built by Captain Eads at the mouth of the Mississippi. He was a member of the Mississippi River commission for 16 years, and its President for five years, during which time he had to deal with many difficult hydraulic problems. He was also a member of the permanent Board of Engineers for fortifications and river and harbor improvements, and commanded the Engineer School of Application at Willets Point, New York, for about a year.

General Comstock was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, to which he donated a trust fund to be devoted to researches in electricity, magnetism and radiant energy, the value of which subjects his own experience had led him to appreciate. He became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1892.

In addition to his classic report on the Lake survey, General Comstock's name appears as a signer of the reports of sixty local engineering boards, of twenty-one of which he was President. His life furnished a good illustration of the value of science to the professional engineer, and of the value of the engineer to science.¹ He died at New York City, May 29, 1910.

G. F. SWAIN.

¹ This memoir is abstracted from a longer memoir of General Comstock by General Henry L. Abbot, in the annual of the association of graduates of the United States Military Academy, in 1912.